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EMILY JACE McLAUGHLIN

RE: FLORIDIAN GUESTHOUSE GEM—FURNISHED!

TO THE LANDLORD:

You may have felt my presence from your sidewalk, checking out the guesthouse property. I love when the seasons change in Miami. Lizards lose chlorophyll instead of trees.

In these photos of your guesthouse, I noticed a needle abandoned on the bathroom counter. I mistook it for a wrinkle in the screen and zoomed in. There it was, pure as a wedding invitation in the mailbox. I thought perhaps this needle was left by your previous tenant, the type of “right tenant (no college students)” for your “right price (wink).” Even though I am in college, I am still your right tenant. I am sure. I’m familiar with the going rates. Plus, as a full-time working student, I live at my desk. I barely exist.

I have taken some liberties here to include proof of car loan payments, two references and a voluntary sample of my English essay. I am never ashamed to take my application to the next level. I’ve never had anything to lose.

About the car loan payments and writing sample: I am paying off a used Saab. In English Composition, I wrote a paper about my Saab. The professor spent a full period rationalizing not only why she was assigning

this paper, but why she was employed by a community college. Personal narratives, she called the papers. The exercise: to view the people in your life as characters. Form hypotheses, imagine what that person-character was secretly feeling. I raised my hand. “When you make assumptions, you make an A-S-S of yourself, get it?” I said. The professor chewed her gum once more, said, “It’s fine. Whatever,” all, like, grow the F up, but now that I recount the look, it was an expression of concern.

Anyway, where is this chick going with this? you’re probably thinking. I’ve clipped an excerpt to help you hypothesize about the “right tenant” behind this response to your ad:

English Composition Personal Narrative

Title

I did not speak to my dad in high school. He left me with my mother. I got her into rehab where all she had to worry about was what visitors would come more than once, for me to sneak her shampoo bottles and mouthwash, so she could suck out the alcohol. I was supposed to stay with my brother Rusty, but preferred staying in my mom’s house without her. Only when I was alone drinking could I think clearly about whether I, also, was an alcoholic. It only occurred to me to wonder this because Rusty had said alcoholics are the people at the party complaining they aren’t drunk enough and can drive everyone else home.

That brownnose in class said you go to jail for having a beer cracked in the car. I told her, “It’s all about the number in your blood, not the number of open cans.” I’d remembered that from a D.A.R.E. skit, acted out to *Bridge Over Troubled Water*.

I never resented my circumstances. I kept sight of the one favor I had to cash in: my dad's new condo address for in-state tuition at Florida International University. FIU was the only place that accepted me, and I had to get out of my town, and fast.

Well, I lost my financial aid due to the series of bad influences.

And my dad says you sometimes have to take a step back to take two steps forward. You might say I'm fortunate Miami Dade Community accepted me as a transfer. I'd rather build my grades here and transfer to the "U." The real jobs go to those University of Miami grads, spoiled rapist pigs.

I first lived at my dad's condo in Aventura. When I traded in my Corolla for my Saab, I drove that bad boy straight to his condo.

"Look at my rims, Mitch," I'd said. He was settling fantasy football debts with the valet. "It's my new whip."

I'd assumed that my dad would be thrilled. The Saab would disguise my fuckedupness to his girlfriend, Dawn, who stormed out in her robe and the black eye from when she slammed her car door across her own face at the gas station pump.

My dad wanted to know just who did I think I was, new Saab or used Saab? If I had this extra cash, why not consolidate my loans? Why not pay him some rent? But it's not even the loan payments that bother him, or the destinations I plan to reach. It's not even that I pawned his car manual, or what he found stashed in my own glove compartment. My dad feared I'd jump a social class with my Saab, which I certainly plan to do. He told me that I need to learn self-respect, and that I could no longer use his address for in-state discounts. Dawn put her hands over my eyes and screamed. Dawn may have felt like my mom did when

I was young. We went to see *Dancing With Wolves* and my mom surprisingly insisted that I close my eyes at all the sex scenes. Now I know it wasn't the nudity she was shielding me from, but all the angles of loving a person. My dad split for Miami soon after, tattooed in my mom's teethmarks, and that's how my whole family quit at once but it always looked like my mom quit first.

"Where do all your fibs come from?" my dad went.

"Me," I said. "In here!" All I was trying to do was to get him to spit out the worst thing he thought about me, so I could picture what I was like, and get used to living as that type of person.

"Must be nice!" he screamed.

Then I sped away in my Saab because in fights the person who gives up first is usually the person making sense.

I've got to pretend I've changed until I have. He doesn't believe I'm employed as the receptionist at a methadone clinic merely to support my education. I know he doesn't really give a shit that methadone is just another drug to get hooked on, the only thing that gets heroin addicts clean. I know he doesn't really give a shit what I do as long as I have health insurance. But he said hanging with dopeheads is bound to get me hooked again. He said, "Didn't the president of AA tell you that?" I told him the founder of AA replaced drugs with sex addiction, so pick your poison, Mitch. And so what, I'm working at the clinic hoping my run-away-brother, Rusty, will show up. I still hope I'll see Rusty on some corner, shaking a can. The years spent waiting for Rusty can buy you a loaf of soda bread, though.

It's hard to visualize our family thrown-up across the country, like immigrants or rich people. I wish the toothfairy or someone told you how many chances you get, or that nobody passes through Florida to get to

another state.

I'm also interested in the impossible question: what makes an addict an addict? Is it genetic weakness? Is it nurture? Is it birth order?

Dawn said my dad and I are cut from the same cloth, which means stubborn sons-of-bitches. Sure, I'm no warm and fuzzy daughter. I didn't decorate his bathroom in flamingos like her. I do not send Valentines. But I did feed their cat, who walks like a two-timer. And I do hope people adapt to their emotions. Besides, it was hard for me to study there, in their condominium, with that relentless other-shoe-dropping feeling. I swore I'd never rely on another person. It's not that he'd bolt lock me out for real and make me sleep in the "impulse purchase" I was hell-bent on driving, it's that I don't want to owe him anything he can come to collect, the same way I called my favor in to him for that in-state tuition at FIU.

End Excerpt

My essay went on to talk about overcoming obstacles and perseverance. On the back, I jotted down bars in Kendall the teacher could meet people her age at, fishing for extra credit. When the teacher forced the class to criticize each other's papers, everyone else's ended with acceptance.

2) References:

Dawn. My stepmom Dawn is my reference. Dawn's legit. She really wants the best for people. She'll confirm that I don't lift barbells at moonrise. It's just me and I'm tiny these days. The heat has a way of stealing your appetite, saving it for later. Dawn will assure you that I don't have the

memory of the lady who leaves her shih tzu tied to the post office, then tacks *Lost Dog* flyers to telephone poles on your street. That I don't have the personality of the video store guy, who tapes a list of fine-owing neighbors to his store window.

I'd be at peace with a pool smooth as the cut of a can-opener, watching the evening sun sink through the strainer.

In psychology we learned about survival instincts of mammals, that the instinct of a fox is to diversify his habitat, to dig a den wherever he can, hiding in plain sight of his predators. A fox lurks in the thick edges of the periphery, going about their days during others' nights. I asked the instructor to differentiate why that would be an instinct rather than learned behavior, or what I thought of as street smarts. She didn't have an answer to my question and when I told her that I would be dropping the course, she expressed surprise, not in my doubt about managing her course load, but that I had been able to show up for so long.

Look, the right price in the right neighborhood can be life changing (you should see how much the other places at this price suck ass--my Saab is more inhabitable). When there's a spot for every possession, blood pressure eases.

And if I establish in-state residency, independent of my family, I can pay my bills off from one paycheck, which is (ironically) how my dad taught me to live.

I know how it feels to get bombarded by inquiries. When I collect resumes off the fax at the methadone clinic, my boss tells me to get a feel for

the person through their cover letter, to see who stands out.

I could get fired for breaching confidentiality, but if they really wanted to can me, they'd think of a hundred other reasons.

You may have already guessed it but I am the receptionist at the clinic. I monitor the nurse doing the honors every morning when you come in for your methadone. The autonomous location of my chair allows me to collect the drips from the dispenser whenever she steps away. Most days, I can squeeze at least half a dose into the plastic measuring cup I hide in my drawer.

You may have seen me planting dahoon hollies out back of the dispensary, trying to block the neighbor's view of the line of shady patients at six AM. You know how the community picketed, thinking the clinic decreases property values like a halfway house for pedophiles. The town of Kendall had never united in such force, even against the deportation of the high school's valedictorian. They weren't picturing ordinary painkillers sliding into suit pockets and maternity sweats like Willy Wonka tickets. They weren't picturing college English students responding to ads on craigslist.

That's what Bossman explained at the public hearing, that the main purpose of the clinics is not just to reduce break-ins at Home Depot, but to keep humans alive, how it costs the state something like three thousand a year to treat a patient outpatient versus thirty thousand to put the patient in jail.

Yes. I'd nodded to the nurse as we listened to our boss. Show

up for your dose, invest in one step, one daily commitment to your own story. Now that I think about your story, as a vet, our most committed patient population, I'm certain the needle in your photo was not left out by accident. I'm squeezing my hand into a fist writing this, just assuming I know the kind of right tenant you are looking for. But all I really know is that giving up H feels like giving up water forever.

The thing is, the ad for the receptionist job at the clinic also stated "no college students." I marched in there with my application, seized the boss with my eyes, explained why I was the right candidate, despite my age, how I could chase down kite strings. How I never give up.

Bossman at the dispensary. He's my second reference. He knows that I've been living out of my Saab in the clinic parking lot. He's been reassuring me that the staff sometimes needs more assistance than the patients, but any day now he'll have to call the tow company for the clinic lot. He'd be doing me a favor, he said, by forcing me to at last find a stable living arrangement.

Look, maybe I should swap my new ride back for the guestroom at my dad's. I'm not writing to solicit sympathy. I cry only in good times, like, I cried the day my dad answered that phone call about using his address for college.

So I hope I've adequately supplied answers to your questions:

- 1) Proof of monthly payments
- 2) References
- 3) In a few words, tell me, why do you need my guesthouse?

I know a few words will not move heaven and earth. But I thought your explanation point in the advertisement might be an overcompensation for something like loneliness, the needle left out in the bathroom might be a cry for help, a cry more indirect than this response.

So I thought I'd try this approach once more. I thought that you, more than other landlords, might get the feel for how, step-by-step, I am trying, desperately, to save my own life.